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THE SPIRITUALITY OF FRANCIS LIBERMANN: *A Man Beyond His Time*¹

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Libermann escaped the pernicious influence of this Cartesian philosophy, in large part thanks to his early education.

“...the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings”.
(Gerald Manley Hopkins)

Introduction

Since the mid-nineteenth century, Francis Libermann's spiritual teachings have animated and inspired the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. To fully appreciate his unique spiritual doctrine it is essential to keep in mind the original cradle of its birth. Born and raised the son of the Rabbi of Saverne and steeped in the study of the Torah, the Law and the Talmud, Libermann was immunized against the prevalent philosophical anthropology of his day, the dichotomized world-view of René Descartes. Descartes' philosophy had tainted Western thought-categories since the early seventeenth century. Under its all-pervasive influence all things spiritual - mind, soul and spirit - had metamorphosed into disembodied entities. A language of mind vs. body, spirit vs. spirit, natural vs. supernatural, and secular vs. sacred became the coin of the religious and spiritual realms. In many ways human spirituality had evolved into an angelistic perfectionism. Libermann escaped the pernicious influence of this Cartesian philosophy, in large part thanks to his early education. Studying under the tutelage of his rabbinical father, he would have learned early in life that the Hebrew language had no one word for the human body equivalent to our own. The closest Hebrew cognate is *basar*, sometimes translated as *body*, but its essential meaning is *flesh*. Robinson (1952) informs us that in the ancient Hebrew worldview it was not the *flesh-body* that made us separate individuals; it was rather the *flesh-body* that connected us in a web of life tissue to all other human beings. This *flesh-body*, animated flesh, is the total human being, and the foundation for our corporate identity, our solidarity with one another and, above all, the ground of our common bonding to God. Robinson highlights the fact that the ancient Hebrews were not directly interested in the body for its own sake, but in its vertical dimension, insofar as it is the *flesh-body* that binds us together God-ward. *Basar*, our animated human flesh, emphasizes our co-existence, our bodily be-ing together in the world, open to the Holy Spirit of God.

To understand Libermann's uniquely existential and incarnational spirituality, we must keep this Hebrew notion of the human body alive. It will sharpen our insight into his passion for social

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and racial justice, human solidarity, democratic values and deep respect for the freedom and dignity of every human being. Pope Pius XII described Libermann as an “outstanding master of the spiritual life.” Henry Koren, C.S.Sp., after studying his writings intensely for many years, did not hesitate to claim that in the sphere of spiritual doctrine he proved himself to be an authentic pioneer. To express the reasons for the originality, universality and timelessness of Libermann’s spiritual doctrine, he writes:

“Father Libermann’s science of holiness escapes the confines of his native France, rises above the romanticism and self-conscious mortification of the nineteenth century and exercises its appeal far beyond the personnel of his own congregation” (1958, p.157).

With his profound grasp of our common human flesh and our deeply rooted solidarity, Libermann was ahead of his time in many ways and in many arenas. He understood that the mission of the Christian community and that of the missionary are identical to the mission of Jesus, “...to proclaim God’s reign as the power of unconditional grace to make persons, relationships and *bodies* whole.”(Volf & Lee, 2001, p.389).

The Here and Now of Gestalt Psychotherapy

Libermann’s spiritual doctrine, always rooted in *basar*, points us toward the Holy Spirit’s action in the world of our daily life. Koren never tires of reminding us that it is not enough just to listen to the words or read the texts to discover what truly animates an individual or an organization. We must pay heed to what the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty has called “*operational intentionality*”, the lived and living motivation of a person or an organization: “One must pay attention to what really lives in a group—its driving force, its charisma”. (Koren, 1990, p.15). And so he asks of his fellow Spiritans, what has been and what is the driving force of their founders and of their members? In his unequivocal and oft- repeated response, he replies, “...our lived spirituality can best be described as an evangelical availability which remains attentive to the Holy Spirit manifesting Himself in the concrete situation of life”(p.15). Libermann’s spirituality is contemporary in so many ways, precisely because he roots it always in the existential situation. In his insistence upon the “concrete situation of life”, we detect echoes of Gestalt Therapy’s focus on the Here and Now of human experience. The authors of *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in Human Personality* (Perls et al., 1951, p.31) encourage this exercise: Try for few minutes to make sentences starting with what you are at this moment aware of. Begin with the words ‘now’ or ‘at this moment’ or ‘here and now’. After presenting this technique for contacting the environment more vividly, they make this comment:

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“Whatever is actual is, as regards time, always in the present. Whatever happened in the past was actual then, just as whatever occurs in the future will be actual at that time, but what is actual –and thus all you can be aware of– must be in the present. Hence the stress if we wish to develop the sense of actuality, on words such as ‘now’ and ‘at this moment’.

Likewise, what is actual for you must be where you are. Hence the stress on words like ‘here’” (p.32)

Libermann’s constant advice to seek the Holy Spirit “in the concrete situation of our lives”, cradles the “here and now” of Gestalt therapy.

...Libermann, unlike so many of his religious contemporaries and superiors at home and even in Rome, did not pine for some mythical golden age of the past.

Libermann’s constant advice to seek the Holy Spirit “in the concrete situation of our lives”, cradles the “here and now” of Gestalt therapy. It grounds the individual’s spiritual life in the actual here and now of the existential dialogue of a personal past-present-future. In this context, “...openness to experience demands detachment from the past.”

A man of his time

Libermann seems to have been richly endowed with the gift of ‘reading the signs of the time’. It was for this reason that he could consider the clergy’s failure to keep up with the times to be their greatest fault. During the French revolution of 1848 and the subsequent democratic elections, Libermann, unlike so many of his religious contemporaries and superiors at home and even in Rome, did not pine for some mythical golden age of the past. He was prompt to let go of the traditional Church devotion to the *ancien régime*. He encouraged his men to get out to vote at the dawning of the democratic State in France. On February 22, thousands of Parisians had taken to the streets to demand suffrage reform. King Louis Philippe lost his nerve and abdicated. After months of chaos and confusion in the Parliament and throughout the nation, Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, nephew of the exiled great Emperor, Napoleon Bonaparte, was elected President of the Second Republic on December 10, 1848, by an overwhelming majority, 5.5 million votes to his closest contender’s 1.5 million. No matter that Louis Napoleon had a reputation of a ‘cretin’ and a licentious playboy. The people had spoken and Louis’ election held out promise of a more just order for the poor of France. Libermann honored the people’s decision. The sentiments of his heart must have resonated also with the goals of the American Declaration of Independence of 1776, “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” In a letter to a friend in 1848, he wrote that he welcomed the revolution because the royalist government, in his judgment, was not genuinely concerned for “the happiness of the people”. Ahead of his time in the political arena, he took pains to make clear that he saw the downfall of the old regime as a sign of God’s justice against the autocratic regimes that abused the

rights of the common people. These sentiments of his heart to see justice done for the poor prompted him to opine that someday the autocratic rulers of Russia would also fall. Even in the life of vowed religious communities he expressed his inclination toward democratic values when he wrote: "...in the final analysis, the supreme authority in the Congregation is neither the Rule nor the superior, but the majority of its members" (Letter to Fr. Gamon, March 20, 1848, cited in Koren, p.18).

In the arena of social and racial justice, Libermann also proved himself to be far ahead of his time.

In the arena of social and racial justice, Libermann also proved himself to be far ahead of his time. At least 125 years before the Catholic Church adopted its "preferential option for the poor" Libermann had made this concern the keystone of his life and his work. When a Carthusian monk in France wrote to ask about the purpose of his new Congregation, Libermann replied:

"To preach the good news to the poor, that is our general goal. Nevertheless, the missions are the principal object we aim at, and in the missions we have chosen the most wretched and abandoned souls. Providence gave us our work for the Blacks..." (Letter to Dom Salier, May 30, 1840, cited by Gilbert, 1983, p.106).

...it was not sufficient to teach the poor in Africa "how to operate things", but it was necessary to teach them "how things operate"...

Koren points out certain sympathies between the doctrines of Karl Marx and Libermann. In their common concern for the poor and oppressed of society, each in his own way arrived at the conviction that individual acts of charity would never suffice to ameliorate the social conditions that spawned poverty and oppression. They both grasped the necessity for the structural and systemic change of social conditions. What was needed to reform society was not a handout but a hand-up. In Libermann's opinion it was not sufficient to teach the poor in Africa "how to operate things", but it was necessary to teach them "how things operate" (Gilbert 1983, p.105). Marx equally promoted an intimate link between education and work. Koren tells us that he advocated an "early combination of progressive labor with education" as "one of the most potent means for the transformation of the existing society into the new society of universal brotherhood". (Selected Works, 2,38, cited in Koren, 1990, p.106). In some ways, Libermann's values so closely matched some of Marx's that today he might well be condemned as an enemy of capitalism, or besmirched with the tag of socialist, promoting class warfare. Koren tells us that Libermann experienced a profound feeling of gratitude over the downfall of the privileged classes of the rich, "that bourgeois aristocracy", which he calls "*the legal establishment*" which worships money and "tramples on the interests of the poor"... "God has overthrown their idol" (cited in Koren, 1990, p.107). Libermann is not speaking here in the voice of a political or economic reformer, but he echoes the voice of the Hebrew prophets of old:

“Hear this, you who trample the needy to do away with the humble of the land... So as to buy the helpless for money and the needy for a pair of sandals... The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob, indeed, I will never forget any of their deeds”. (Amos 8: 4,6,7).

He taught us to be like a feather in the wind, the sail of a ship responding to the breath of the Holy Spirit.

Your soul is the ship, the Holy Spirit is the wind; he blows into your will and your soul goes forward...

In the realm of personal spiritual direction, Libermann’s principles far transcended the common orientation of his contemporaries. As we shall soon see, his style of spiritual direction closely resembled in many ways the non-directive and client-centered approach of the 20th century American psychotherapist, Carl Rogers. But Libermann was not just a man ahead of his time in many ways; he was a man beyond his time. He had no desire to be first in anything, except for love of God and service to others. He was beyond his time because his message and his approach rested solely upon the action of the Holy Spirit. He taught us to be like a feather in the wind, the sail of a ship responding to the breath of the Holy Spirit. “Your soul is the ship, the Holy Spirit is the wind; he blows into your will and your soul goes forward...” (cited in Gilbert, 1983, p.41). It is here that we find the basis of Libermann’s flexibility and notable lack of rigidity in his spiritual doctrine. His natural disposition to allow others to be themselves anticipated and prefigured Carl Roger’s Client-Centered Counseling by at least one hundred years.

Libermann’s Rogerian Inclinations

Empathy, for instance, plays a central role in the theory of Rogerian psychotherapy. It also played a major role in Libermann’s life and in his spiritual doctrine. Rogers tries to describe what occurs in the most satisfactory therapeutic relationships. He writes:

“...that it is the counselor’s function to assume, in so far as he is able, the internal frame of reference of the client, to perceive the world as the client sees it, to perceive the client himself as he is seen by himself, to lay aside all perceptions from the external frame of reference while doing so, and to communicate something of this empathic understanding to the client.” (1965, p. 29)

It would appear that Libermann’s personality was richly endowed with this gift of empathy. Boniface Hanley, O.F.M. (n.d.) describes this special talent:

“Libermann was a negotiator par excellence. ‘One of the things that contributed to his success in any transaction was his delicate courtesy’, Father LeVasseur remembered.

His judgment was excellent and he was vividly, keenly, delicately sensitive.

...he mentally exchanged places with the people concerned and tried to imagine how he would feel if someone treated him as he intended to deal with them...

‘His judgment was excellent and he was vividly, keenly, delicately sensitive. When he had to act, he mentally exchanged places with the people concerned and tried to imagine how he would feel if someone treated him as he intended to deal with them’ (p. 24)

It is amazing how this ability to mentally exchange places with other people reflects basic Rogerian principles. For example, Rogers postulates that “...every individual exists in a continually changing world of experience of which he is the center” (1965, p. 483). This postulate closely mirrors the central role that “the concrete situation of the individual” plays in Libermann’s spiritual doctrine. A Rogerian corollary of the previous postulate states: “...the best vantage point for understanding behavior is from the internal frame of reference of the individual himself” (1965, p. 494). In his own life and teachings, Libermann fully embraced this axiom.

This gift of empathy, Libermann’s extraordinary capacity to understand the other person by entering their personally experienced world, is intimately linked with another core concept of Rogerian psychotherapy – unconditional positive regard. Rogers describes this condition of therapeutic change as follows:

“When the therapist is experiencing a warm, positive and acceptant attitude toward what is the client, this facilitates change. It involves the therapist’s genuine willingness for the client to be whatever feeling is going on in him at that moment – fear, confusion, pain, anger, hatred, love, courage, or awe. It means that the therapist cares for the client, in a non-possessive way. It means that he prizes the client in a total rather than a conditional way. By this I mean that he does not simply accept the client when he is behaving in certain ways, and disapprove of him when he behaves in other ways. It means an outgoing positive feeling without reservations, without evaluations...” (1961, p. 62)

Keeping in mind this description of unconditional positive regard, we can only stand in awe before the spiritual genius of Libermann, when we read his words:

“The uncomfortable feeling we can have when we are with people who think and judge differently to ourselves, who despise us and have no time for us, can easily make us stiff and timid, with the result that we are gloomy, evasive and awkward when we are with them. This can give a very

bad impression and put people off our religion. We must love everybody, whatever they feel about us or our religion". (Letter to LeBerre, 1847, cited in de Mare, p. 376).

Libermann's attention to his "uncomfortable feelings" reminds us of Rogers' focus upon the essential importance of accepting all our competing and conflicting feelings if we wish to attain to a wholesome state of bodily (organismic) congruence.

Intimately bound to Rogers' therapeutic principle of unconditional regard for the client is the principle of acceptance. He defines acceptance as:

"...a warm regard for him as a person of unconditional self-worth—of value no matter what his condition, his behavior, or his feelings. It means a respect and liking for him as a separate person, a willingness for him to possess his own feelings in his own way. It means an acceptance of and regard for his attitudes of the moment, no matter how negative or positive, no matter how much they may contradict other attitudes he has held in the past. This acceptance of each fluctuating aspect of this other person makes it for him a relationship of warmth and safety, and the safety of being liked and prized as a person seems a highly important element in a helping relationship". (1961, p. 34)

Libermann's writings abound in examples akin to this Rogerian attitude of acceptance. Close associates commented on feeling at home and at ease in his company. Without doubt his generous capacity to accept others as they were, to let them be themselves, contributed greatly to the healing relationship of his spiritual direction. Here are some examples of how highly he valued both self-acceptance and acceptance of others:

Close associates commented on feeling at home and at ease in his company.

Bear gently, patiently, and most peacefully, as best you can, your needs and your infidelities.

"Bear gently, patiently, and most peacefully, as best you can, your needs and your infidelities. Etch deeply in your heart that Jesus and Mary tolerate them with sweetness and kindness, and that their love for you is always the same. (p. 5, 6)... The great happiness of perfection is not a matter of a day. You need time, work, prayer and confidence. One gets there only after getting up and down and being encouraged to begin again many times. Don't torture yourself nor become discouraged (p. 7)... God... gives us his grace even when we are offending Him. My hope is there...He will help me despite my faults. Be tranquil about all that (p. 8)...Here is a general

One gets there only after getting up and down and being encouraged to begin again many times.

rule that must be absolutely observed, and that for conscience's sake: every time a thought produces in the mind some rigidity, like callousness, struggle or trouble, you must treat it as a temptation and reject it... putting your mind in calm before God and sacrificing yourself to His divine love (p. 10)... Try to keep yourself interiorly in great peace, so that the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be not idle in you. If you let yourself become troubled, agitated, anxious, the Holy Spirit will not be able to act in you as He would (pp. 19-20)... Generally speaking, when you have committed a fault, don't trouble yourself over it (p. 29)... Here is a general rule that must be followed absolutely and that in conscience: every time a thought about no matter what comes up and produces in the mind a certain perplexity or a certain tenseness, something like a harshness, something like a hardness, a struggle or trouble you must treat it like a temptation and reject it (pp. 35-36)...” (All quotes extracted from Libermann (n.d.), trans. F.X. Malinowski).

...self-acceptance is central to his doctrine of spirituality...

Some religious people have been suspicious of “self-acceptance,” rejecting it as an invention of secular humanistic psychology. Vitz (1977), for example, parodies humanistic psychology and blames its ‘selfist’ theories for the narcissism of our age. Unlike Rogers and Libermann who believe in the essential goodness of human beings, Vitz stands more in the Calvinist tradition of gloom and doom, and does not so believe. It is obvious from the advice of Libermann that self-acceptance is central to his doctrine of spirituality. Over and over again he urges us and encourages us in the strongest terms to treat ourselves always in a calm, gentle, peaceful and self-accepting fashion. His language is never hard, harsh, severe, judgmental or condemnatory. All self-rejection or self-hatred is foreign to his spirit. Only in the heart that is at peace with itself can the Holy Spirit be free to do its work.

The acceptance of others is a correlate of this self-acceptance. When the gentle angel of self-acceptance swoops down to slay the dragon of self-negation, it simultaneously opens its arms to embrace and affirm others. Rogers stated that closely related to openness to our own inner and outer experience there emerges an openness and acceptance of other individuals. To make his point, he quotes from Maslow about self-actualizing individuals:

“One does not complain about water because it is wet, nor about rocks because they are hard... As the child looks upon the world with wide, uncritical and innocent eyes, simply noting and observing what is the case, without either arguing the matter or demanding that it be otherwise, so

does the self-actualizing person look upon human nature both in himself and in others.” (cited in Rogers, 1961, p.174).

Expressions of this gracious acceptance of others just as they are abound in the spiritual writings of Libermann:

“Put down as a fundamental principle in the matters of direction: one must not constrain nor cramp the one being directed. Refrain from prescribing too many rules...I regard as a capital point in direction...leave grace with a lot of liberty... (pp. 13-14). Avoid as a big fault all that is hard and inflexible... (p. 66). It is a great principle, in divine things, not to wish to lead everybody according to one’s opinion and one’s manner of acting. Rigidity, in this kind of thing, has deadly results. God has His view on each one. He communicates and distributes His graces diversely (p. 35). For your ministry, follow this general rule: severity loses souls, sweetness saves them.” (Libermann, (n.d.), p. 51)

*It is a great principle...
not to wish to lead
everybody according to
one’s opinion and one’s
manner of acting.*

Finally, we can say that Libermann’s spiritual doctrine of unconditional acceptance spared him from all tendencies toward an idealized perfectionism. Once again, he was at least one hundred years ahead of his time. In the 1940’s and 50’s, the renowned neo-Freudian, Karen Horney, developed the concept of the ‘idealized self’. She describes this ‘idealized self’ as “...what we are in our irrational imaginations, or what we should be according to the dictates of neurotic pride” (1950, p.158). This idealized self is impossible of attainment for it is based upon the illusion that a finite being can be perfectly complete. Libermann had anticipated this psychoanalytic insight in 1846 when he wrote this advice:

“A very important principle for action is to be always on guard against ideal perfection. It is good that one knows how things ought to be for success; one must know the conduct to follow for the realization of the means of execution which are the best, but it is yet more important to know how to modify one’s views, to bend, to accommodate oneself to people, things and circumstances. Be assured that you will never execute your plans as you would desire. It is a mirage to wish to obtain a complete result such as one sees it and one desires it. It is of the highest importance to adapt, to bend in all, if one wants to have success; otherwise one gets hurt from the difficulties coming from persons and things”(Libermann, (n.d.), pp.51-52).

*...be always on guard
against ideal perfection...*

Conclusion

Once again, Libermann demonstrates that he was a man with a message ahead of his time. His vision did, indeed, transcend his own constricted time and place. While most of the Western World gloried in its own cultural imperialism, he wrote to his missionaries in Africa:

“Forget about Europe, its customs, its ways of thinking; you have to make yourselves blacks with the blacks so as to form them in their own way and not according to the European model.” (cited in *de Mare*, p.351).

*Forget about Europe...you
have to make yourselves
blacks with the blacks*

A good century before the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act of the 1960's in our own country, Libermann wrote these words referring to his failed mission in Haiti:

“I am convinced that our success would have been complete and we would have been able to show the detractors of the black race that not having a white skin does not mean that they are any less children of God than themselves, that they have the same nobility of soul and are just as capable of accepting faith and morality. In short, color does not in any way denote inferiority” (Letter to M. Percin, Feb. 11, 1845, cited in *de Mare*, p.377).

We may recall the words of a powerful curial Cardinal at the time of Vatican II when the declaration on Religious Liberty was being debated: “Error has no rights”. With this *bon mot*, he hoped to squelch the Church's recognition of religious liberty for all. How different the approach of Libermann. In 1846 he wrote:

“It is difficult to appreciate how important this tolerance is... There is no way in which people will always agree... If... we allow each person to see things in their own way and according to their own character and mentality, then great good will come from it.” (Letter to Lossadat, April 13, cited in *de Mare*, p.367).

*It is difficult to appreciate
how important...tolerance
is...*

Most striking are the words from one of Libermann's letters quoted earlier. In 1847, he wrote that people who disagree with our religion:

“...must be given complete freedom to think and act as they want. No man on this earth is capable of forcing the will, the conscience or the intellect of others.” (Letter to LeBerre, Sept 8, 1847, cited in *de Mare*, p.376)

Libermann's vision stretched over ordinary time to embrace many of the values we hold close to our hearts today. He cherished and advocated for religious tolerance, racial justice, human dignity, liberty and solidarity with all the poor and oppressed of the world. He could see far because of his total availability to the Holy Spirit. “In His light, we see light”. He foresaw eternal truths in this light

Liebermann's vision stretched over ordinary time to embrace many of the values we hold close to our hearts today.

and was thus not only ahead of his time, but a man with a message beyond time.

His spiritual wisdom constantly reminds us that we never labor alone in some ideal situation in some perfect world. It is only under the brooding of the Holy Spirit that the groaning of creation is stilled and the wounded heart of the world healed. With Liebermann we pray, "Come Holy Spirit and renew the face of the earth".

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Footnotes

¹ This article is a greatly abbreviated and revised version of the article by Smith, D.L., (2003), The Embodied Spirit of Libermann's Spirituality and Some Psychological Themes, in *The Celebration of the Ordinary: The Spiritans, 1703-2003*. Bethel Park, PA: Spiritus Press.